

Prison Training: vision and values in Albania

Peter J Leonard describes the challenges of training to develop values and vision within the context of social reconstruction.

Working with foreign colleagues in their own country is not easy. The pitfalls of cultural and political differences and the problems of language have to be negotiated with sensitivity and patience if anything worthwhile is to be achieved. This was especially true in 1994 in the small, infant democracy of Albania where I was sent to provide advice to the prison service.

The assignment itself appeared a modest task. It comprised two parts. First to help the Albanian prison service develop a vision statement supported by a set of values and, second, to train senior staff in its meaning and applicability for their work. The intention was to provide a framework of thinking that would guide Albanian colleagues in their efforts to improve prison conditions. Behind this agenda, however, was the need for the Albanian authorities to convince Western Europe that they were serious about social reconstruction so that crucial funding could be secured.

although I did see some evidence of corruption and the burgeoning influence of organised crime.

Conditions in Albanian prisons were not quite as bad as colleagues had described in some other newly democratic countries but at best they were on the poor side of basic. The imprisonment rate of 30 per 100,000 population (compared to around 120 in England and Wales and over 600 in Russia) spread across nine prisons, meant that, except in the main prison in Tirana, there was no excessive overcrowding. Life for prisoners, however, was extremely tedious and deprived and there was nothing in the regime to relieve the abject boredom. Most spent their days in dormitories with only occasional access to education classes and periods of exercise. Visits were an especial treat because visitors brought food to supplement the totally inadequate prison diet.

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In the early 1990s Albania was emerging from a long and especially repressive period of communist dictatorship. The problems of the prison service were similar to those found in former Soviet bloc countries but compounded by years of isolationism imposed by the former leader, Enver Hoxa. Senior prison service staff were inexperienced in administration and prison management and had little knowledge of what a modern prison system in a democratic country might look like. Some had been imprisoned by the former regime and only a few had met and talked with a foreigner before. Early conversations revealed suspicion of an assignment thrust on the prison service by politicians eager to gain international credibility. More important, though, was the lack of confidence individuals had both in their own abilities to lead a process of change and in the ability of Albania itself to turn the new found zeal for democracy into practical benefits. The most self-deprecating remark made to me was that, "Albania is in the skin of the devil". What this meant, an official informed me, was that nothing good crosses the border and everything inside is rotten. I cannot say my own experiences wholly supported this view

ways of encouraging senior staff to lift their heads and create a vision of the sort of prison service they would like to run. The real difficulty in this was to get them to focus on a way of thinking, when what they really wanted was practical help. For these officials practical help meant money to provide equipment to improve the regime for prisoners and, more pressingly, to feed them properly. Understandably the fact that my assignment carried no budget or direct access to funds relegated it, in their view, to meddling interference by the West. Getting through this perception required slow, painstaking discussions in which the purpose of the work had to be explained repeatedly in a variety of different ways. In the end the most persuasive argument was that I would be submitting a report to the Council of Europe which would help inform the case for future financial aid.

For the moment this argument held sway and we formed a team from headquarters staff and prison governors to work on drafting the vision statement. We did this by identifying the sorts of ideas and messages the statement might contain and then distilling them into a few lines. Whilst this sounds



simple, the job took some time because the meaning, initially expressed in English, had to make sense when translated into Albanian. This proved especially demanding for our interpreter who had to constantly challenge the precise meaning of words. An added difficulty was to produce a statement that would have credibility domestically as well as internationally. At a time when most Albanians were living in poverty any statement implying prisoners would enjoy better conditions than the free population would result in its dismissal as a mere irrelevance.

Following initial agreement on the vision statement and a supporting set of values, senior officials again returned to the subject of practical help. Although strictly outside my terms of reference they wanted to use my experience to identify steps they might take to improve prison conditions in advance of the receipt of European aid. This was something of a compliment to my earlier arguments that improvements were not just about massive injections of funds and I could hardly refuse.

Principally my recommendations concerned improving relationships between staff and prisoners, giving the staff more involvement in management decisions and generally changing their role from that of guard. Other simple things like engaging prisoners in the repair of buildings, manufacturing simple items of furniture and growing food on prison land were all ways of making conditions better but they required managers to think of prisoners as something more than passive captives. Importantly abolishing the role of chief prisoner, which carried responsibilities for negotiating on behalf of other prisoners and managing the dormitories, seemed crucial to reducing intimidation. Although involvement at this level of detail seemed at first sight inappropriate, it provided tangible examples of how changes might be made for the second part of the assignment.

This second part required me to travel around the prisons talking to staff and to hold a training seminar in headquarters in Tirana. Prison staff proved very receptive to the sorts of ideas being put forward and quickly identified with the notion that they could do a lot to improve conditions themselves. The set-

piece seminar, however, was very different with the more senior staff expressing the reservation that what I was advocating would lead to a total breakdown of good order in the prisons. Staff were, they thought, guards who must rule with uncompromising firmness or else lose all control. No amount of reassurance persuaded them that improving conditions would generate greater legitimacy for authority in the eyes of prisoners. They accepted the new vision as an ideal position statement but saw its achievement as a remote and unattainable dream.

That is how matters would have been left had it not been for one official who had recently attended a prison conference in Scandinavia. He supported, according to the interpreter, all that I had been saying and said it was the way prisons were in the West. The important lesson for me was that I should have involved this official in the formal presentation because his knowledge proved decisive, changing the mood of the seminar from rejection to qualified acceptance.

The final outcome was that the service accepted the vision statement and governors were asked to seek ways to implement my recommendations in their prisons. Given the favourable reception of the ideas in prisons I would expect that small changes followed from the work. From the outset, however, I had told the Albanians that my assignment was to offer advice to help them create their own prison service, to learn from good practice elsewhere but not simply to copy what others were doing. The advisor's job is to advise and to comment, but only managers and their staffs can bring about real change.

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More details of his Albanian assignment can be found in The Prison Service Journal, No 98, March 1995.